

THE FLOOD

It has been 50 years, but for those who remember the very mention of it releases a torrent of images and sensations, experiences that have remained etched in the mind long after the Ohio returned to the safe embrace of its banks.

By Ira Simmons

Thursday, Jan. 21, 1937. Erma Steinau spent the evening playing bridge with her family. A cold rain pelted the roof, but the big house on Second Street was warm and cozy. As the cards flicked around the table, the family talked in a distracted way about the river. The Ohio was rising.

During the previous few days, newspapers had run stories about the evacuation of people who lived at Shippingport and in other low-lying areas near the river. There was little news in that; those places flooded almost every year. "We would feel very sorry for the poor people," wrote Mrs. Steinau in her journal. "Perhaps we would even give a few old clothes or a dollar and our consciences would be clear. "This time, however, it was going to be a little different for us."

This time it would be different for millions in the Ohio Valley. The greatest flood in American history was beginning. It would leave destruction all along the 980 miles of the river — from Pittsburgh to Cairo, Ill. — 500 deaths and \$400 million in losses.

Louisville was the largest city to feel the full, devastating impact. Before the flood was over, 230,000 of the city's 325,000 residents would flee their homes. Seventy percent of Louisville would be under water.

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Of its 300 churches, 250 would be flooded. Ninety deaths would later be attributed to conditions created by the flood, and financial losses would be put at \$100 million.

But statistics can't express the impact the flood had on those who lived through it. Charles Doyle, now 77, was then a young policeman. He spent 10 straight days in a boat, helping stranded people and hunting for looters.



Associated Press

By mid-February, a West End family whose home had been under 12 feet of water had returned to begin the clean-up.

who stole \$1 million in property from the West End. "This was my town," said Doyle. "I'd been born and raised here. I couldn't believe it was happening. I hope I never see anything like it again."

Over the decades the city has looked back at its worst natural disaster, remembering fear and heroism, sacrifice and humor.

To look back is to remember a Louisville frozen in time, like an old snapshot. Times were hard, and more hard times were to come. The city was struggling to recover from the Depression.

In those days most of Louisville's population lived downtown; the Highlands and Crescent Hill were the two main suburban communities. Only 7,500 people lived beyond the city limits in Jefferson County.

The ethnic identity of neighborhoods was more pronounced. People were more likely to be labeled "an Irishman" or "a Jewess." It would be foolish to say they were more prejudiced than we; perhaps they were just less inhibited about writing down their prejudices.

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Billy Davis